



FILM SCHOOL

PRACTICAL GUIDE TO AN IMPRACTICAL DECISION

JASON B. KOHL



Film School

A Practical Guide to an Impractical Decision

Jason B. Kohl



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Film School

Develop the tools you will need to succeed before, during and after your film school education.

Film School: A Practical Guide to an Impractical Decision is a specific, straightforward guide to applying, getting into, and thriving in film school and in the industry in general. Not only does this book appeal to both prospective and current film students, it also features an in-depth discussion of the application process, both from the graduate and undergraduate perspective. You will learn how to choose between different schools and programs, avoid debt, succeed at festivals, and transition out of film school and into the work world. Author Jason Kohl offers:

- Tips on how to develop your voice before attending film school
- A chronological layout that allows you to continually refer to the book throughout your film school process
- Advice on how to gauge the cost of attending film school

Whether you are just starting the application process, or are a recent film school graduate, *Film School* gives important advice and insider knowledge that will help you learn and grow in the film industry. This book is a must-have for anyone who wants to know what it takes to succeed in film school and beyond.

Jason B. Kohl is an Austrian/American filmmaker, author and teacher from Michigan. His short films have played SXSW, Los Angeles, Locarno, BFI London and been finalists for the Student Academy Awards. Jason is currently financing his first feature film, with production planned for 2016. He's a former Fulbright and DAAD Artist Scholar with an MFA in Directing from UCLA Film School. This book is a resource he wished he had in applying to film schools and beginning a career as a young filmmaker.

Dedication

To my parents, to whom my gratitude defies words. —

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Thank you to my classmates at UCLA, who taught me just as much as the films I made there.

Foreword

THE INHERENT PROBLEM OF TALKING ABOUT WHETHER ONE SHOULD GO TO FILM SCHOOL IS THAT IT CARRIES WITH IT THE ENORMOUS COMPLEXITY OF COST. HULK COULD SPEND HOURS TALKING ABOUT THE DREADFUL ECONOMICS OF HIGHER EDUCATION, WHETHER IT BE THE DRASTIC IMPACT ON THE MIDDLE CLASS, THE UNADVERTISED HIGH COSTS OF ADDITIONAL EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS OR EVEN THE HAUNTING ALBATROSS OF STUDENT LOANS—WHICH JUST MEANS THAT ANY AND ALL FILM SCHOOL QUESTIONS CAN'T HELP BUT BE TEMPERED WITH THE INITIAL QUESTION OF: "WHAT IS YOUR ECONOMIC SITUATION LIKE? CAN YOU REALLY AFFORD IT?"

IF YOU REALLY, TRULY CAN'T AFFORD IT, THEN YES, PERHAPS IT'S WORTH IT TO TAKE A CHANCE ON DIVING RIGHT INTO THE WORKING WORLD INSTEAD OF ATTAINING A MOUNTAIN OF INSURMOUNTABLE DEBT. AND BECAUSE OF THIS, THAT MEANS THAT NO MATTER WHAT "THE ANSWER" OF WHETHER OR NOT YOU SHOULD GO TO FILM SCHOOL, THE DECISION IS GOING TO REQUIRE A SLIDING SCALE DEPENDING ON EVERY SINGLE PERSON'S UNIQUE SITUATION.

HOWEVER, THE CENTRAL QUESTION CAN BE AUGMENTED BEAUTIFULLY. WE CAN REMOVE THE VARIABLE OF COST AND INSTEAD ASK ONE SIMPLE, POINTED QUESTION IN ITS PLACE:

DOES FORMAL FILM EDUCATION HAVE GREAT VALUE IN AND OF ITSELF?

THE ANSWER IS ABSOFREAKINLUTELY.

WHILE MANY ARGUE THAT FILM SCHOOL IS A WASTE OF TIME, HULK CAN DISMISS THAT WITH A SIMPLE "OF COURSE NOT." BUT TO PROVE SO, HULK IS ACTUALLY GOING TO GO THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION BY EXAMINING THE KIDS WHO WILL ENTER FILM SCHOOL AND BELIEVE IT WILL FORGE

THEM IN THE FIRE OF COMPETITION, ALLOWING THEM TO EMERGE AS A ROCK STAR AMONG THEIR PEERS AND BE GIVEN A YELLOW BRICK ROAD RIGHT TO HOLLYWOOD.

IN FILM SCHOOL, THEY WILL HOPEFULLY LEARN THAT SUCH EXPECTATIONS ARE NOT ONLY NONSENSE BUT COUNTERPRODUCTIVE TO THE SINGLE BEST PART ABOUT THEIR EDUCATION . . .

FILM SCHOOL IS AN INCREDIBLE PLACE TO MAKE MISTAKES.

REALLY. SO MUCH OF YOUR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT WILL RELY ON NECESSARY FAILURE AND FURTHER RE-EVALUATION. IT'S THE TRIAL AND ERROR METHOD WRIT LARGE. BECAUSE FILMMAKING IS SO ROOTED IN THE NOTION OF TAKING WHATEVER IDEA IS IN YOUR HEAD, WHETHER IT IS AN IMAGE, A STORY BEAT OR A LIGHTING TEXTURE, AND BEING ABLE TO TRANSLATE THAT ABSTRACT NOTION INTO SOMETHING REAL. AND DOING SO IS NOT A STRICTLY INTUITIVE PROCESS. IT TAKES LOTS OF TIME AND CONSTANT FAILURE. IT'S A KIND OF FAILURE THAT NEVER, EVER STOPS TO BE HONEST. WHEN YOU BECOME A PROFESSIONAL, YOU REALIZE IT IS PART OF THE GRAND PROCESS OF FILMMAKING: *THE ART OF REFINEMENT*. BUT TO SEE SUCH FAILURE AND CORRECT, YOU HAVE TO HAVE BEEN THERE MANY TIMES. AS SUCH, THERE IS A REASON THE PIXAR MODEL IS BUILT ON A "HURRY UP AND FAIL" MANTRA. IT'S WHAT ALLOWS THEM TO TRULY PUT THEIR GENIUS TO WORK. AND SO IF YOU ARE FORGING YOUR UNDERSTANDING IN FILM SCHOOL, YOUR BIGGEST ADVANTAGE IS THAT YOU ARE GIVEN AN ALMOST UNPRECEDENTED SITUATION TO "FAIL" WITH NO LARGER PROFESSIONAL CONSEQUENCES. IN FACT, YOU ARE ONLY PRESENTED WITH MORE OPPORTUNITIES TO GROW.

THE OTHER REASON THE FILM SCHOOL COMPETITION/ROCK STAR IMAGE IS SO INANE IS BECAUSE FILM SCHOOL IS AN INCREDIBLE OPPORTUNITY FOR YOU TO START BUILDING A COMMUNITY. BECAUSE FILMMAKING IS PERHAPS THE MOST COLLABORATIVE ART FORM ON THE PLANET AND YOU WILL ABSOLUTELY NEED TRUSTED COLLABORATORS AND FRIENDS. PEOPLE THAT YOU WOULD TRUST WITH THE

ENTIRE PRODUCTION IF NEED BE. BECAUSE HULK ASSURES YOU SUCH TRUST WILL BE NECESSARY. SO THE EARLIER YOU CAN GROUND YOURSELF IN HEALTHY GROUP DYNAMICS, AND THE EARLIER YOU CAN FIND PEOPLE WHO WILL SUPPORT AND DEPEND ON YOU IN TURN, THE MORE SUCCESS YOU WILL BUILD FOR THE FUTURE, ESPECIALLY IF YOU ENTER THE PROFESSIONAL ARENA TOGETHER LATER ON. BECAUSE YOU WILL REALIZE THAT THERE IS ABSOLUTELY ZERO NEED FOR COMPETITION AND JEALOUSY, AS THE OLD CLICHÉ OF “A RISING TIDE LIFTS ALL BOATS” HOLDS MORE TRUE FOR THIS INDUSTRY THAN PERHAPS ANY OTHER (THERE ARE A LOT OF JOBS ON A BIG FILM SET, FOLKS).

BUT MORE THAN THAT, HULK HAS TO ADMIT THAT HULK IS AN OLD SOFTY FOR THE PLAIN AND SIMPLE NOTION THAT EDUCATION ITSELF, THE PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE AND ALL THAT COMES FROM IT, IS PERHAPS THE MOST SACRED ACT WE HAVE AS A SOCIETY. IT IS THE CORNERSTONE OF OUR MODERN DEVELOPMENT, THE DRIVING ENGINE OF ECONOMY, THE LIFEBLOOD OF A PRODUCTIVE SOCIETY. BUT MORE THAN THAT, EDUCATION HAS BEEN SO PARAMOUNT TO JUST ABOUT EVERY LITTLE BIT OF SUCCESS IN HULK’S CAREER. SERIOUSLY. AND BECAUSE YOU HOLD THIS WONDERFUL BOOK IN YOUR HANDS, HULK WAGERS THAT YOU VALUE EDUCATION, WHETHER FORMAL OR INDEPENDENT, JUST AS MUCH AS HULK DOES. SO PLEASE LET HULK TRY AND MAKE THE CASE FOR SUCH MERITS.

FILM SCHOOL CAN HELP MOLD YOU INTO A BETTER, MORE OPEN PERSON. IT WILL FORCE YOU TO ENCOUNTER THINGS THAT ARE BEYOND YOUR UNDERSTANDING. IT WILL EXPOSE YOU TO CINEMA THAT IS OUTSIDE THAT WHICH YOU CURRENTLY LIKE. IT MAKES YOU GROW, LEARN AND CHALLENGE YOURSELF. AND IT ULTIMATELY DEMANDS THAT YOU WORK HARD, THAT YOU ERASE ANY RESIDUE OF ENNUI AND APPLY YOURSELF.

HARD WORK . . . IT’S JUST SO PARAMOUNT TO EVERYTHING.

BECAUSE FILM SCHOOL . . . NO FILM SCHOOL . . . THESE ARE SIMPLY TWO PATHS. BOTH ARE VALID. BOTH HAVE OBSTACLES. BOTH HAVE ENORMOUS BENEFITS. AND BOTH

STRETCH OUTWARD TO THE SAME INEFFABLE GOAL OF ACCOMPLISHING YOUR DREAM. BUT IF YOU MANAGE TO ACCOMPLISH EXACTLY WHAT BOTH PATHS ILLUSTRATE, YOU WILL COME TO AN ALL-IMPORTANT DISCOVERY. YOU WILL REALIZE *A DREAM IS NOT SOMETHING THAT IS ACCOMPLISHED* . . .

A DREAM IS THE ATTAINING OF A CONSTANT STATE OF CONTENTMENT IN DOING HARD WORK THAT YOU ENJOY.

HARD WORK THAT FULFILLS YOU. THAT MAKES YOU FEEL ALIVE AND VITAL. THERE IS NO TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN. THERE COULDN'T BE, FOR THIS INDUSTRY PROVIDES SO FEW MOMENTS OF ACTUAL TRIUMPH. THERE IS SIMPLY YOUR HAPPINESS WITH THE PROCESS. THERE IS NO SATISFACTIONS IN THE REWARDS. THEY DO NOT REALLY EXIST. YOUR SATISFACTION RESTS IN A JOB WELL DONE. IT DEPENDS ON YOUR BELIEF IN THE WORK ITSELF. THE BELIEF THAT WHAT YOU DO IN THIS INDUSTRY MATTERS. IT IS THE BELIEF THAT YOU ARE *THE "ETERNAL STUDENT" OF YOUR OWN PROFESSION*.

AND THE SOONER YOU OWN THAT REALIZATION, THE SOONER REAL HAPPINESS CREEPS INTO YOUR SOUL

WITH THAT . . . BE SMART. BE DEDICATED. BE KIND. BE GOOD.

REPEAT.

AND KNOW THAT HULK WISHES YOU WAY MORE THAN LUCK,

FILM CRIT HULK

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PART | ONE

Introduction: Middle-Aged Olympians

They who lack talent expect things to happen without effort.

Eric Hoffer, *Reflections on the
Human Condition*

In 2012 the United States sent 530 athletes to the summer Olympics.

Their average age: 26.

In 2012 the Academy Awards nominated 49 individual filmmakers in the categories of screenwriting, directing, producing, editing, cinematography and documentary.

Their average age: 50. Almost twice that of the Olympians.

Some more sobering statistics:

1. UCLA, like NYU, USC and most top film schools, accepts less than 5 percent of applicants.
2. Of those accepted, around 1 percent make a successful feature film.

All this is to say that a career making feature films is incredibly difficult to achieve. Very few people, including the majority of top film school graduates, ever do it.

So why buy this crazy book? Why not spend the money on an LSAT prep course and a nice bottle of bourbon?

Because studies show that people who think achieving a goal will be difficult plan better, work harder, and persist longer than people who think it'll be easy. In other words, they actually give themselves a shot at succeeding.

A big part of individual success comes from an ability to manage your expectations. As I continue on my own path as a filmmaker, I realize how much of my frustration stems from my own naïve expectations of how things are supposed to work, usually in my favor. Thus one of my major goals in writing this is to help you conceptualize what film school is, and what getting in actually means.

I hope this book will be a roadmap you can turn to when you get lost, confused or frustrated; believe me, it's all part of the process.

I don't discuss current curriculum or equipment because that information constantly changes. If you're serious about filmmaking, you'll have to do that research on your own anyway.

I made my first narrative short film in 2006. It was shot on a shoestring budget with a two-person crew. Seven years later, my UCLA MFA Thesis Film premiered at the 2013 South by Southwest (SXSW) Film Festival and was a finalist for the Student Academy Awards. Inside this book is everything I learned in